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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Borders Without Fences

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IN the debate over how to prevent illegal immigration from Mexico into the United States — armed patrols, electronic surveillance, prison time for first offenders and a 700-mile-long 15-foot-high fence — few politicians have voiced concern over the last option's profound effects on wildlife.

Authorized by the Secure Fence Act of 2006, this barrier (83 miles of which have already been built) will bisect a border region that has some of the most ecologically diverse landscapes in the hemisphere. It is here — in a land of deserts, mountains, conifers and cactus — that bird species from North and Central America share territories and cross paths during migrations. It is here that endangered wildlife, like the jaguar and gray wolf, have an opportunity to reoccupy lands from which they were extirpated during the last century.

The list of other beautiful common or rarely seen animals that live along the border is long. A small sampling would include cougars, desert bighorn sheep, ocelots, pronghorn antelope, road runners, white-tailed deer and hundreds of species of birds and insects. The fence would physically prevent both large and small mammals as well as reptiles from traveling across the border, and the lights atop the fence would attract insects, making them easier prey for birds that feed on them. Some of these insects pollinate the plants of the region, including cactus.

Since the secretary of homeland security will have authority to waive laws that stand in the way of building the fence — like the Endangered Species Act — wildlife and habitats could be destroyed on a scale not seen since the 1960s, when the nation's first wilderness and environmental laws were passed. Of course, many argue that the fence is an issue of national security and the safety of the American people trumps that of American wildlife. But that reasoning is flawed. The economic health of many people is increasingly reliant on the health of their natural surroundings.

In fact, studies done at the Universities of Montana and Colorado show that intact natural landscapes attract not only tourists to a region but also new residents and businesses that pump dollars into local economies. It isn't just plentiful sunshine that has made the Southwest one of the fastest-growing regions in the nation, it's also the region's diverse natural attractions, one of which is wildlife.

The fence, however, will reduce wildlife-viewing opportunities in the many national parks, monuments, refuges, wilderness areas and forests that garland the United States-Mexico border. And its effects will be

felt far to the north and south, along the mountainous backbone of the continent, where conservationists have spent decades mapping and preserving migration corridors that allow the free movement of wildlife between the two nations.

Such ecological damage has already been seen around the world, where a variety of high, long fences have been constructed. In Botswana, for instance, the government erected fences, starting in the 1950s, to separate wildlife and livestock. As a result, at least 250,000 wildebeest, unable to reach water, perished from 1970 to 1984 and tens of thousands of antelope have died. In Asia, the migration of gazelles has been curtailed by the fence that the Chinese government built along the border with Mongolia in the 1990s. And in Australia, a 3,300-mile-long fence built in the 1950s to keep dingoes out of the southeastern part of the continent deprived kangaroos of their natural predator. Thus, the kangaroo population flourished, reducing the number of sheep the land could sustain, a result that the backers of the fence — sheep ranchers — neither foresaw nor intended.

Unfortunately, since the fence along the United States-Mexico border is designed to keep people out, it can't be outfitted with features that allow wildlife to migrate over and under livestock fences and highways. Let's hope that when it comes time to appropriate the money to build the entire fence, cooler Congressional heads will prevail. There are better ways to protect our borders than building a wall that people will inevitably find ways around but wildlife won't.

Ted Kerasote is the author of "Out There: In the Wild in a Wired Age" and the forthcoming "Merle's Door: Lessons From a Freethinking Dog."

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